Graduates looking for their first job need more than just labour market information, they also need to know how the labour market operates. Unfortunately information about the graduate labour market is often difficult to find and expensive to collect. The Real Prospects project aims to plug this information gap by working with employers, universities and graduate employees to find out how previous generations of graduates have succeeded in negotiating the graduate labour market.

Earlier this year HECSU and Graduate Prospects launched the 2011 Real Prospects survey, an online questionnaire which asks employed and self-employed graduates to share their experiences of the world of work. In this year’s reports we examine how graduates manage the transition between higher education and employment and ask employees what more they think universities could do to help students prepare for the world of work. We also examine how respondents feel about their current job and ask what they would like to see employers offer in terms of career development support.

This report examines the experiences of the respondents who graduated from a UK university between 2006 and 2010 having studied full-time on a three year course. It asks what kind of work experience they did and explores what more universities could do to help students gain work experience while they are studying. The report also asks what career development activities Real Prospects graduates took advantage of, and reveals how they think careers services could improve the support they offer to students and graduates.

*Please note percentages throughout the report have been rounded to the nearest whole number so will not always add up to 100%.
22,000 graduates responded to the 2011 Real Prospects survey. This report examines the experiences of the respondents who graduated from a UK university between 2006 and 2010, having studied full time on a three-year course.

**PROFILE**

*Who responded to the Real Prospects 2011 survey?*

Universities have been grouped according to the new classification developed by Purcell et al for Futuretrack, a longitudinal study which explores how and when students make decisions about their careers. The researchers developed a new way of classifying universities and colleges by ‘tariff’, which they were then able to use as a basis for comparison between different types of institution. The tariff points an applicant has can be considered in some respects to be a tangible measure of their educational capital, and the tariff points required by institutions are generally indicative of the comparative status of the institution and the competition to enter it (although the reliability of these measures is still open to debate). Institutions were ranked according to their UCAS tariff points score, and then grouped according to their ranking. The six distinct categories identified were: Highest Tariff, High Tariff, Medium Tariff, Lower Tariff, General HE College, and Specialist HE College. For further information please see: Purcell, Elias and Atfield. 2009. Working Paper 1: A new classification of higher education institutions.

### AGE

- **Under 24**: 60%  
- **25-29**: 35%  
- **30-39**: 5%  
- **40+**: 2%

### ETHNIC AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

- **White British**: 78%  
- **White (any other white background)**: 7%  
- **Mixed**: 3%  
- **Chinese or Chinese British**: 3%  
- **Black or Black British**: 2%  
- **Asian or Asian British**: 7%

### UNIVERSITY

- **Highest tariff**: 48%  
- **High tariff**: 25%  
- **Medium tariff**: 21%  
- **Lower tariff**: 5%  
- **Other**: 1%

### GENDER

- **Female**: 60%  
- **Male**: 40%
Work Experience

How did Real Prospects graduates find out about work experience opportunities when they were students?

- Over two-thirds of Real Prospects respondents gained some kind of work experience while they were studying for their undergraduate degree.
- 40% of respondents identified work experience opportunities by browsing the adverts on their university’s careers service website, while 1 in 5 sought opportunities by sending speculative letters to the organisation they were interested in working for.
- Around 1 in 3 were advised of an opportunity by a friend or family member, while 1 in 5 were advised of an opportunity by a university tutor or lecturer.

### What Kind of Work Experience Did Real Prospects Respondents Gain While They Were Studying for Their Undergraduate Degree?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Work Experience</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casual paid work</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid work experience placement/internship</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid work experience placement/internship</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpaid voluntary work</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement/sandwich year as part of their degree</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not undertake any work experience while at university</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### How Did Real Prospects Respondents Find Out About Work Experience Opportunities While They Were at University?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Did They Find Out about Opportunities?</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saw an opportunity advertised on their university’s careers service website</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend/family member advised them of an opportunity</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent a speculative letter to the organisation asking if they had any opportunities</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A university tutor/lecturer advised them of an opportunity</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw an opportunity advertised on the company’s website</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw an opportunity advertised on a graduate careers website (e.g. prospects.ac.uk)</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw an opportunity advertised in a magazine/newspaper</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saw an opportunity advertised on the Graduate Talent Pool website</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WORK EXPERIENCE
How do graduates think universities could help their students gain relevant work experience?

ARTICULATING THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Graduates think universities should do more to actively encourage students to undertake work experience while they are studying for their degree. They don’t necessarily think that work experience should be integrated into their academic study (in fact many think it should be kept as a completely separate, extracurricular activity) but they do think universities could do more to explain why work experience is important and suggest how students can go about accessing it.

Real Prospects graduates think work experience is important for several reasons:

• Opportunity to try out jobs – many students find it difficult to work out what they want to do after they graduate, but Real Prospects graduates think work experience can be helpful because they feel it gives students the opportunity to try out a variety of different roles and industries as they begin to work out what they would like to focus on in the future.

• Good for the CV – graduates are aware that employers are inundated with applications from recent graduates and that competition for entry-level and graduate jobs can be fierce. They think students need to be reminded that those who have some additional work experience (as well as a good degree) will have a positional advantage within the labour market.

• Building working relationships – working for an employer is very different to studying under the direction of a tutor and some graduates find it difficult to cope with this change in status when they leave university and enter employment. Gaining work experience gives students the opportunity to learn how to build and manage professional working relationships, and also allows them to work out how to deal with the hierarchies that exist within most organisations without the pressure of trying to impress in their first graduate role.

• Developing skills – graduates think it is important that students are able to demonstrate that they are capable of planning their time, taking responsibility for their own work, collaborating with colleagues, contributing to projects as part of a team, participating in meetings, meeting deadlines, performing general administrative tasks, using specialist software, reporting to a line manager, solving problems, taking pressure of trying to impress in their first graduate role.

Students can see where their peers found work experience opportunities when they are applying for jobs.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

‘Work experience is invaluable – you learn a lot by listening to conversations in the workplace.’

‘If you are not sure what you want to do, trying internships in areas that interest you can help you to decide.’

‘Work experience, voluntary work, sports clubs and personal interests are an essential part of proving to an employer that you are more than just the product of a university course – you have to show you are an individual. Experience doesn’t need to be in the field you are applying for, you just need to show that you can leverage understanding from one situation and apply it to another.’

‘I’d advise students to get some work experience in the field they think they want to enter – that way they can test it out before they jump into it!’

‘I’d encourage students to try and fit in work experience during their final year. I regret not doing any and my CV is lacking because of it.’

‘The current job market is tough; to get ahead of the game students need to start applying for voluntary work experience as soon as possible. 6 months voluntary work can make a huge difference to your CV and it can lead to further opportunities.’

IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES

Graduates think students need more help when it comes to identifying opportunities for work experience, and feel universities and employers could think more creatively when they are promoting and organising work experience opportunities.

SECURING OFF-CAMPUS OPPORTUNITIES

Many careers services already advertise internships and placements on their websites, but graduates think they could do more to help students seek additional opportunities elsewhere.

• Time management – graduates welcome placements which offer students the opportunity to join an organisation for several weeks or even six or twelve months, but they also point out that not all students can spare that kind of time, especially if they need to undertake paid employment during term time or in the holidays. They think universities could do more to help students who need to arrange work experience placements which will enable them to work more flexibly (e.g. one day a week for a term, rather than four weeks in a row in the summer).

• Approaching employers – graduates are keen for universities to advertise internships and casual vacancies, but they also think institutions should offer more support to students who want to find their own opportunities. Practical advice (such as who to contact when they’re sending a speculative letter, how to phrase the request, how to approach employers by email or telephone, how to improve their chances of success) is especially useful for students who lack the confidence to approach employers themselves.

• Links with local employers – graduates think it is important that universities promote work experience within their local community and suggest ways local employers can take advantage of their pool of talent. For example, universities might like to remind local businesses and charities that their students would be interested in project-based opportunities as well as longer term work placements (e.g. if they need someone to write a monthly newsletter or an extra pair of hands once a week to help out at the end of the tax year).

• Learning from experience – graduates think it is really useful when students can see where their peers found work experience opportunities in previous years. They suggest that careers advisors or departmental administrators could try to compile a directory of work experience opportunities detailing where students have worked, how they found the opportunity, how they approached the organisation, and what they did while they were there. Graduates also think current interns should be encouraged to report back (either in person or in writing) when they return from a placement (regardless of how formal or informal that placement may have been) so students can hear what they learnt from the experience.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

‘Promote the concept of work experience more visually around campuses.’

‘If you don’t know where to go, have a look around your local area. I know of some great opportunities around your university.’

‘Remember, if you want to work at a large company then you must apply for structured summer work experience or a degree placement.’

‘I regret not finding some work experience opportunities in my final year.’

‘Work experience is crucial so I would suggest that students should gain as much work experience as possible. Not only does it enhance your CV, it also gives you real experience of the world of work and helps you to improve your technical skills as well as soft skills.’

‘I have been looking around the university and my local area for a placement – I will try to get one this year.’
When they are looking to gain experience of graduate jobs, universities and think that students should be encouraged to take advantage of this when they are looking to gain experience of graduate jobs. Universities could consider recruiting students to help organise conferences or encouraging members of staff to consider offering work placements within their department or service. Departments could also remind lecturers and researchers that students might be interested in providing administrative support for their research projects, helping them recruit participants or monitoring their lab work. If the university can’t offer students work experience, perhaps they could offer them the opportunity to shadow a member of staff for a day instead. Universities employ graduates in a whole range of roles (from academic librarians to marketing officers, project officers to IT professionals), so graduates think it is a pity that institutions do not take advantage of their own pool of talent when they are seeking to find work experience opportunities for their students.

Student-run organisations – many Real Prospects journalists say that writing for your student newspaper is one of the best things you can do if you want to be a journalist because it is gives you some real-world experience of writing for a publication. Work placements are useful because they give students an insight into the world of work, but joining a student-run organisation can often be a better way of gaining experience of actually doing a job. Universities offer plenty of on-campus activities, but students don’t always realise that these activities offer opportunities for work experience. For example, students don’t need to write articles to contribute to a student newspaper, they could volunteer to proof the copy, provide administrative support, manage the finances, try to persuade local businesses to place adverts, organise a marketing campaign, design a survey asking the student population what they would like the paper to investigate or conduct some research into what students think about a particular issue. Student societies and campus services such as nightline or university radio stations give students opportunities to gain experience of managing projects, organising events, working with colleagues and balancing the books, but students won’t take advantage of these opportunities until their university reminds them that they exist.

Opportunities to be entrepreneurial – many Real Prospects graduates had struggled to find practical ways of gaining the project management experience that employers look for when they are filling graduate positions. Encouraging students to set up and manage their own extra-curricular projects is a great way of reminding students that they can gain practical experience of project management and entrepreneurship within the relatively safe environment of the university campus. Universities need to give students some ideas as to what they could do (e.g. set up a magazine, organise a trip abroad or an activity weekend for their fellow students, organise a campaign to raise money for a charity) and how they could go about doing it (e.g. could they get local businesses involved as sponsors? how could they persuade businesses to support their activities by drawing on the idea of corporate social responsibility?). Managing their own extra-curricular projects gives students a great opportunity to develop their organisation, management, marketing, team-working and leadership skills, but many wouldn’t know where to start. They need universities to take the lead by making practical suggestions as to what they could do and how they could do it.

Enterprise challenges – graduates who had participated in their university’s enterprise challenge were extremely positive about these initiatives. Enterprise challenges are designed to encourage budding entrepreneurs to begin the process of setting up their own business. Universities help students to put together a business proposal (by giving them a business mentor, providing them with opportunities to practice ‘pitching’ their business to a panel etc), which they then enter into a competition. The winners are assessed by a panel of experts and the winning business proposal is usually awarded a cash prize. If you don’t already organise an enterprise challenge it might be worth introducing one to see if your students would benefit from the initiative.

Encourage students to organise their own careers events – some Real Prospects respondents were involved in student societies which put on their own careers events. Some linked up with graduate recruiters and arranged formal dinners with graduate employers and sessions on commercial awareness, while others invited local business people in to talk to the students in their department. Careers services often lack the resources to run all the events they would like to, so encouraging students to organise their own careers events can be a really useful way of getting students to engage with careers information while also providing them with an opportunity to gain some experience of planning, organising and managing an event.

 identifier: on-campus opportunities

identifier: in their own words...

 identifier: work experience

 identifier: work experience

 identifier: work experience

 identifier: work experience

 identifier: in their own words...

 identifier: in their own words...
SKILLS TRAINING

Real Prospects graduates think it is important that students use extracurricular activities to build up a portfolio of skills, but they also think that universities could do more to help students achieve a basic working knowledge of office skills through extracurricular training courses and information sessions.

• **Basic office administration** – when they first began looking for jobs and work placements many Real Prospects graduates felt that they became trapped in a vicious cycle of not being able to get a job because they didn’t have any experience and not being able to gain any experience because they couldn’t get a job. Graduates also feel that universities don’t always recognise that it can be difficult to secure temporary office work during the holidays if you don’t have any previous administrative experience. They think that universities should consider running some short courses to give students some experience of basic office administration (e.g. working with Microsoft Office, managing databases, writing business letters, dealing with telephone queries, taking minutes etc), or if this is not feasible perhaps institutions could direct students to an evening class instead.

• **Technology** – graduates think students should be made aware of the kinds of software packages they might need to use in their chosen profession (e.g. editing packages such as Adobe Photoshop, project management packages such as Prince2, data analysis software etc). Many universities already offer a whole range of courses through their IT Services department, but students don’t always think to take advantage of them while they are still at university. Prompting students to think about what they might need to use in the future might encourage more students to take advantage of these opportunities while they are freely available.

• **Networking** – students are often encouraged to use their networks to identify job opportunities, but many don’t really understand what ‘networking’ actually involves. Real Prospects graduates feel students would benefit from more guidance in this area, and think universities could do more to equip their students with the skills and confidence they need to network effectively. They don’t necessarily think universities need to arrange more networking events, but rather that students might find it useful to attend an information session which gave them some practical advice as to why networks are useful, how students can build up their networks through extracurricular activities, how to maintain their networks, and how to use them in the future when they need someone to provide them with a reference, are looking for job opportunities or need help to find some work experience.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

‘Students need more opportunities to gain key skills e.g. using excel, writing reports, giving presentations’

‘Help students acquire basic skills for the workplace – from touch-typing to using the photocopier!’

‘I don’t think it is the role of universities to prepare students for employment - they are there to inspire a love of knowledge and to teach students how to think and learn about the world! However, I do think that students should be encouraged to attend courses on employment skills (e.g. report writing, time management etc) outside their academic studies’

‘I honestly believe a short course covering the basics of administration would be valuable, even though this is attainable through work experience; lack of practical office skills seems to be a huge obstacle for graduates to overcome in their search for paid work’

‘Students should be encouraged to take summer school/evening classes to learn useful administrative skills – these are necessary for nearly every job’
LABOUR MARKET EXPERIENCE
How did Alex become an editor?

ALEX (ENGLISH LITERATURE, 2006)

Did you gain any work experience while studying for your undergraduate degree?

During the holidays I had a summer job in catering, which I used to help fund my studies. I also did some research for a publisher.

What are you doing now?

I'm an editor with a small publishing house.

How did you become an editor?

After I graduated I took some temporary work to tide me over while I applied to various graduate schemes and searched through thousands of unappealing business-speak filled online job adverts. I also applied to do a PGCE to give myself another option. While I was looking for work I was living in the Midlands, but travelling all over the country to attend interviews in cities such as London and Manchester. After six frustrating months an agency saw my CV online and put me forward for an editorial position with a business-facing magazine based in my local area. I studied English Literature and edited a student newspaper while I was at university so I had excellent writing and editing skills. I also spent a year in Austria on the Erasmus exchange programme and can speak German, which was important because the employer was a small German publishing house. I was offered the position and am still with the company two and a half years later. When I first took the job I thought it would be a stop-gap, but I have ended up staying because I find the role really rewarding and found that working for a small company suits me because I am given lots of responsibility.

What does an editor do?

I edit the features section of the magazine and am responsible for the content of our daily e-newsletter and the website, so I write and edit news and feature articles and also do some HTML code writing for the website. I also work with the advertising manager to ensure the advertising copy is consistent across all our products, arrange interviews with people in the industry, conduct research and represent the company at trade exhibitions, meetings and product launches.

What do you like about your job?

I enjoy doing research and writing copy. My job allows me to be creative and to help shape the products I work on. I like working to tight deadlines and travelling all over the world meeting interesting people. I am given lots of responsibility and my company encourage me to be independent because that is the key to being good at the job.

What do you dislike about your job?

I'm not always interested in all the topics we have to cover in the magazine, and it can be a bit tedious when you have to meet and befriend people you don't particularly like! Working for a small company gives me plenty of opportunity to learn on the job, but the downside of this is a lack of any formal recognition of my contribution.

What are you planning to do next?

I would like to move into book publishing, but that isn't really a growth area at the moment so I'm not sure if I stay in the magazine industry. I would like to move over to the commercial side and write for a wider audience, although business-to-business magazines seem much more secure at the moment.

What careers advice would you give to the students who will be graduating next year?

Be confident - if you have made the most of your course you will be a fundamentally more interesting person and better able to sell yourself in interviews. Throw yourself into job applications as early as possible and grab experience whenever you see the opportunity. You will ultimately be better served trying to do things you love rather than preparing for a job your careers service thinks you ought to want. Be persistent and don't be down on yourself when you're finding it difficult to get work. Temping for cash never hurt anyone, but doing a sub-standard job is not good for you. Treat your temp position as you would a full-time post and this will make the transition easier when you do get something permanent.

LABOUR MARKET EXPERIENCE
How did Matt become an architectural assistant?

MATT (ARCHITECTURE, 2008)

Did you gain any work experience while studying for your undergraduate degree?

In my second year I found a job working for a property developer on the university careers website and was employed on an ad hoc basis doing drawing and analysis 1-2 days a week. I carried on doing the job during term time until I graduated and spent my summers working abroad to broaden my experience.

What are you doing now?

I'm an architectural assistant.

How did you become an architectural assistant?

When I graduated in 2008 there were very few architecture jobs around as the credit crunch was beginning to bite, but luckily I could still work 1-2 days a week for the property developer I worked with while I was a student. I combined this with a part-time gardening job to keep me going while I continued to apply for full-time work. Eventually the property company decided to take me on full-time and I joined the team as a permanent member of staff in 2009 and have been there ever since. I'm currently working on some big projects in London and working for a developer means I get to see how all the different aspects of construction fit together, which I feel is great experience.

What does an architectural assistant do?

I'm involved in all aspects of the design and construction phases including: spatial analysis, cost analysis, environmental analysis and procurement. I also research building products and methods and am responsible for information management.

What do you like about your job?

I work for a small company so I am able to contribute to decisions and I work closely with the more senior members of staff who are driving the projects forward (e.g. the company directors, construction managers, and third party consultants such as architects and engineers). I also get to design features that I wouldn't get to work on if I worked for a larger company.

What do you dislike about your job?

The only problem with working for a small company is that I have to do a lot of the administrative work myself, but I think that comes with the territory of being one of the younger members of staff.

What are you planning to do next?

I would like to stay in the same company until some of the projects are finished so I can say I have experience seeing a project through from beginning to end. After that I would like to go back to university and do a postgraduate qualification so I can register to become an architect. Once I've qualified I'll probably work in an architecture practice for a few years before setting up my own business.

What careers advice would you give to the students who will be graduating next year?

I think students who are just about to graduate should not worry too much about what they end up doing for their first role and just try their hardest to be enthusiastic about the company they are working for. I think you are unlikely to get exactly what you want out of your first (or even second or third) job, you just have to make the most of the experience and see it as a chance to learn and grow!
How many Real Prospects graduates visited their university's careers service website?

- 84% of Real Prospects graduates visited a careers website such as prospects.ac.uk while they were studying for their undergraduate degree. However, 48% did not visit a careers website until their final year at university. 39% visited a careers website during their first year, while 33% first accessed a careers website when they were in their second year.

- Around 80% of Real Prospects graduates visited their university's careers services website while they were studying for their undergraduate degree. Of these respondents, over a third (34%) visited their careers service website during their first year, while 36% first accessed the site during their second year. 30% did not access their university's careers services website until their final year at university.

- Nearly 50% of Real Prospects graduates attended a one-to-one careers advice session with a member of their university's careers service. Most respondents (64%) did not attend a one-to-one session until they were in their final year, although 30% reported that they attended a one-to-one session in their second year. Only 6% arranged to have a one-to-one session with a careers adviser when they were in their first year.

### CAREERS SERVICES

**What kinds of career development activities did Real Prospects graduates take advantage of when they were at university?**

- I attended an event organised by the careers service for students studying my subject: 46% Yes, 54% No
- I attended an event organised by the careers service for students interested in a particular occupation/industry: 52% Yes, 48% No
- I attended a one-to-one careers advice session with a member of my university's careers service: 53% Yes, 47% No
- I attended a careers event organised by my department: 67% Yes, 33% No
- I attended a mock interview organised by the careers service: 88% Yes, 12% No

**WHAT KINDS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES DID REAL PROSPECTS GRADUATES UNDERTAKE WHILE AT UNIVERSITY?**
I visited my university’s careers service website

- Languages and literature: 14% Yes, 86% No
- Social sciences: 16% Yes, 84% No
- Humanities: 16% Yes, 84% No
- Communication: 19% Yes, 81% No
- Physical, natural and life sciences: 19% Yes, 81% No
- Agriculture and animal science: 19% Yes, 81% No
- Mathematical and computer sciences & technology: 20% Yes, 80% No
- Building and engineering: 21% Yes, 79% No

I attended a one-to-one careers advice session with a member of my university's careers service

- Languages and literature: 54% Yes, 46% No
- Social sciences: 49% Yes, 51% No
- Humanities: 49% Yes, 51% No
- Communication: 47% Yes, 53% No
- Physical, natural and life sciences: 46% Yes, 54% No
- Health sciences: 45% Yes, 55% No
- Agriculture and animal science: 45% Yes, 55% No
- Creative arts and design: 42% Yes, 58% No
- Mathematical and computer sciences & technology: 40% Yes, 60% No
- Building and engineering: 39% Yes, 61% No

CAREERS SERVICES

How do graduates think universities could improve their careers services?

PUBLICISE THE CAREERS SERVICE

- Campaigns – graduates think careers services need to market themselves more aggressively if they want to attract the attention of their students and think it would be worth running more campaigns to remind students where they are and what they’re doing. Suggestions include: poster campaigns publicising careers weeks in which the careers service runs a series of information sessions focusing on a particular issue (e.g. work experience), email campaigns reminding students of the benefits of booking a one-to-one meeting with a careers advisor or publicising the skills sessions that are running that week, or newsletters circulating information and advice and publicising the careers website.

- Information on the careers service website – many universities provide a lot of information and advice on their careers service website, but students can sometimes feel a bit overwhelmed if they visit the website without knowing exactly what kind of information they are after. Repackaging some of this information into bite-sized chunks and disseminating it in other forms (e.g. via leaflets or e-newsletters) will remind students that the resource exists and might encourage them to visit the website to follow the information up in more detail.

CLARIFY ITS FUNCTION(S)

- Make a distinction between the different kinds of support – many careers services offer a whole range of services, but don’t always make the distinction between advice, information and guidance. This can be confusing to students who are looking for information about a particular job role but think the careers service is primarily about one-to-one guidance sessions, or to students who don’t know what they want to do next and think the careers service is geared up to providing information to students who already know they want to be lawyers, investment bankers or engineers. When publicising the careers service it might be worth considering how you could separate your services into categories so students can easily see which services or activities might be most appropriate to them.

- Different kinds of students – some graduates (particularly those who had studied as mature students) believe that careers services are only interested in helping certain groups of students (e.g. students who want to apply to a graduate training scheme, students who will be entering the job market aged 21; students who studied business or finance etc). Making more of a distinction between the kinds of support the careers service offers might make it easier for the careers service to target those students who don’t think the careers service has anything to offer them, and may also encourage students to consider accessing some of these services earlier in their university career.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

‘Careers events need to be more widely publicised. Graduate fairs sometimes went below the radar, especially for first and second year students who were not actively searching for careers related events to attend’

‘Our careers service wasn’t very communicative—you had to sign up to hear about careers events and they never came to our department to give any talks’

‘I missed a lot of careers events (including opportunities to attend mock interviews and assessment centres) because they weren’t advertised or promoted within my department’

‘I think the university I attended did a very good job of running events and getting students to think about their career choices. There were events at both departmental and university level and the careers fairs were well attended by employers’

‘My university had a very comprehensive careers service and they do a fantastic job. They could be more visible though—they need more of a presence on campus’

‘My careers service was extremely good at communicating with me via email when they had opportunities for work experience or jobs, but I found out about the other services it offered when I stumbled across it one day’
ENGAGING STUDENTS EARLY ON

Now that they have graduated, many Real Prospects respondents wish that they had made more of an effort to access their careers service earlier in their university career.

- Try not to put first year students under too much pressure – graduates think it is important to remind students that the careers service can offer them advice and guidance from day one, but they also think advisors need to strike a balance between encouraging students to start thinking about their careers in the first year and putting so much pressure on them so they begin to panic. For Real Prospects graduates, one of the best things careers services can do for first year students is make sure that students know what the university can offer them (in terms of extra-curricular opportunities, part-time jobs etc) so they can make the most out of their time there.

- Try to make the careers service less intimidating – some graduates recalled that their careers service could be quite intimidating. They suggest that the careers service should try to allocate each new student to an advisor so they can contact a person, rather than a ‘faceless’ careers service. Each advisor could then email their new students when they first arrive to welcome them to the university and remind them that they are available for one-to-one meetings, e-guidance etc. This may not be practical for many careers services, but it might be worth considering what more the careers service could do to personalise its communications to new (and existing) students.

SPECIALIST INFORMATION

One of the main concerns Real Prospects graduates have about the provision of careers guidance is the lack of industry specialists. Some graduates found it difficult to access the kind of specialist advice they felt they needed in order to enter a particular industry. Those who studied technical disciplines felt that the careers service should try to allocate each new student to an advisor so they can contact a person, rather than a ‘faceless’ careers service. Each advisor could then email their new students when they first arrive to welcome them to the university and remind them that they are available for one-to-one meetings, e-guidance etc. This may not be practical for many careers services, but it might be worth considering what more the careers service could do to personalise its communications to new (and existing) students.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

‘Bring the careers service regularly to each department – I was too daunted or busy to make a special trip to the careers centre, but would have been more likely to make use of a service in my department’

‘Stop pressurising students to make decisions about their future from day one. I was so worried about what I was going to do when I graduated that it became difficult to enjoy my university experience’

‘More tailored advice for students wishing to enter specific industries, as opposed to the more generic one size fits all approach I encountered at my university’

‘My university department was brilliant at making industry connections and arrange work experience – that’s partly why I went there’

‘I think universities do a lot to help students, but their knowledge of particular sectors wasn’t brilliant – I had a few problems with careers staff who couldn’t understand how my technical expertise would fit into specialist industries’

‘I think careers services need to be much more subject focused. I studied history and politics and when I visited the careers service I felt like 99% of the information was for students interested in business or management, while most arts students were left without any information at all. I wanted some detailed ideas about what I could do with history and I could do with politics, not just a leaflet!’

CAREERS SERVICES

• Engaging business professionals in different industries

Some Real Prospects graduates had attended guest lectures given by experts in their field or ‘industry master classes’ presented by business professionals who had volunteered to talk to students about their industry. They found these kinds of events to be invaluable, and think careers services should consider organising more of these kinds of events as they believe that students really value opportunities to meet the professionals who are working in their field and find out what they are currently working on.

DE-MYSTIFYING JOB TITLES

Most graduates agree that careers services do a lot to help students when they are ready to start applying for jobs, but they don’t think they always offer enough support to students who are trying to find out which jobs they might like to apply for.

• ‘What can I do? as well as ‘how do I get there?’ – most students only meet professionals outside academia when they attend careers fairs, but these representatives are there to recruit graduates and sell their company. They aren’t expected to talk to students about the pros and cons of pursuing a career in their industry more generally. Real Prospects graduates indicate that they would have found it useful if they had been able to access more information which described what employees in different roles actually do day-to-day, as well as what they enjoy about their jobs and which bits they could do without. Many careers services already provide some of this information, but feedback from Real Prospects graduates suggests that they could do more to develop these resources, either by building up a more comprehensive library of case studies detailing ‘a day in the life of…’ the various professions, or by organising more information sessions which enable students to explore what different job roles actually entail.

USING YOUR ALUMNI

Graduates feel that some career events (particularly recruitment events) can be a bit formal, and indicate that they would have liked more opportunities to talk to visiting professionals in a more informal environment.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

‘Give students a real idea of what they might be doing day-to-day – we can’t all work for KPMG!’

‘Perhaps the careers service could arrange an event where alumni who studied different subjects return to the university to talk about what they did next – a bit like a careers fair, but with graduates rather than employers’

‘I think that universities should encourage alumni to talk to current students about their own experiences – my friends and I are now working in industries we didn’t even know existed when we were students’

‘I found my interview with my careers adviser unhelpful. I didn’t have a clear idea about what I wanted to do, and because of this she seemed unable to help me’

‘I think something that would be very useful is down-to-earth chats on LinkedIn with recent graduates. Presentations and stands at fairs are useful, but the people running them are trying to put their company in a good light. I feel that to have a session where students get to ask questions about moving on from university to the world of work would be useful’

‘Bring in more guest speakers to talk about their experiences of work and how their careers developed. Sometimes careers centres don’t have enough information about the more obscure career paths’
CAREERS SERVICES

• Alumni presentations or Q&A sessions – when students attend recruitment events they are often very aware that the people they are talking to are potential employers and don’t always feel able to ask questions or grill them about their own job roles. Real Prospects graduates think they would have felt much more comfortable asking questions of alumni because they are far less intimidating and tend to be closer in age to the students they are talking to.

• A more realistic picture – graduates think it is essential that students are able to find out what alumni have gone on to do and, perhaps more importantly, how long it has taken them to achieve their career. They feel they often had unrealistic expectations as to how quickly they would progress into their chosen careers, and believe talking to alumni will help dispel some of the myths around graduate employment.

• Engaging with alumni – the graduates who responded to the Real Prospects survey were very keen for students who are currently considering their futures to learn from their own experiences and who are extremely good at offering practical advice.

BROADENING HORIZONS

Real Prospects graduates feel that careers services tend to be really good at giving advice to students who were interested in progressing into the more traditional graduate occupations (such as law or teaching) but don’t always offer the same kind of support to students who are interested in finding out about other opportunities.

• Opportunities – many Real Prospects graduates are now in jobs they didn’t even know existed when they were students, and they feel that students should be introduced to a wider variety of roles earlier on. Following up alumni and creating case studies is one way of providing students with more information about the range of opportunities that might be available to them, but graduates also think that careers services need to offer more help to students who don’t know what they want to do, but aren’t ready to meet with a careers advisor for a one-to-one guidance session.

• Alternatives to employment – some careers services already provide students with information about alternatives to employment, but Real Prospects graduates feel this is something all careers services should concentrate on. The labour market is increasingly competitive and full-time, permanent employment is not always attainable (or desirable) for many graduates. They feel universities should remind students that self-employment, portfolio careers and freelancing can all be viable alternatives for graduates at any stage of their career.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

‘Provide case studies (or invite alumni back) to give students an idea of the career paths graduates have taken in the past’

‘Give students more general advice. The advice/help available seems to get better once a student has decided which career to pursue, but getting to that point is difficult and this should be acknowledged by careers services’

‘More informal question and answers sessions with graduates who are now in employment’

‘Information about careers tended to be vague and unhelpful (if you didn’t have a specific job in mind)’

‘More advice about career options – I found it difficult to find out where I could go apart from banking’

‘Invite graduates and people a couple of years into their chosen career to come and talk to students – I often felt that speakers were too old and that someone a bit younger would be easier to talk to’

‘I think my problem was that I had no idea what I wanted to do and the main events were all about corporate jobs, and I wasn’t interested in them at all. Maybe try to promote other sectors too (even though they might not be able to afford to host free drinks receptions)?’

‘Careers fair tended to cater for people with corporate ambitions. I would have liked to have been able to approach employers who were more closely related to my degree e.g. libraries, publishers, literary agents etc.’

PREPARING FOR THE SELECTION PROCESS

Real Prospects graduates think careers services do an excellent job of helping students to compile their CVs, write persuasive covering letters and prepare for interviews.

• The selection process – graduates think careers services provide plenty of support for students when they are preparing their applications, but suggest that some students might find it useful if careers services also staged mock assessment centres or offered more support for those who are preparing for psychometric tests.

• HR professionals – many graduates go on to work in HR and it might be worth considering whether the careers service could draw on their experience when they are planning activities for their students. For example, the university could invite alumni back to host assessment centres or contribute to ‘myth-busting’ sessions, which would give students a better understanding of the recruitment and selection process. Real Prospects graduates were often left wondering what recruiters were actually looking for, and they think it would be useful if HR professionals could explain what students should watch out for when they are writing their covering letters and responding to interview questions.

SMEs VS ‘GRADUATE’ RECRUITERS

Many Real Prospects respondents complained that their careers service focused too much on students who wanted to apply to big graduate recruiters (and graduate training schemes) and consequently failed to provide enough information about the opportunities students might find in small or medium-sized businesses (SMEs).

• Law, business and finance – many graduates felt that if you didn’t want to work in law, business or finance, the careers service had nothing to offer you. They think careers services should do more to ensure students also hear about the opportunities available in SMEs and niche industries, and make sure that these roles are not seen as ‘second-best’ when compared to the ‘gold standard’ of a graduate training scheme.

• Exploiting local links – Real Prospects graduates think careers services could also do more to advertise opportunities with local employers, as students don’t necessarily want to leave their university town when they graduate. Inviting local employers to participate in career development events or talk to students about their business would also give students a better idea as to the kinds of roles that exist within small and medium-sized organisations. If it isn’t practical to invite employers to run sessions, perhaps it would be possible to interview them and create a case study about their organisation instead.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

‘Careers services need to highlight opportunities that are available locally and in smaller organisations – not just large national graduate schemes’

‘I sometimes had the feeling the careers service only wanted to help me if I wanted to do something general and join an organisation like PwC or Deloitte’

‘The careers centre wasn’t equipped for students who wished to pursue careers in academia or mathematically-oriented fields. It was only useful for students who were studying vocational degrees such as business or accounting’

‘My university did an excellent job of providing mock interviews and CV clinics and they also had a comprehensive website for placement/career opportunities. However, it would have been useful to have more help when I was preparing for psychometric tests’

‘My careers service was excellent. You could get advice on applications, CV writing and interviews if you wanted it. Universities should be there to stretch students intellectually, preparation for the world of work should begin once you enter employment’

‘Ask local businesses if they would be willing to send some of their employees to meet with students to speak to a group of students about what they do day-to-day’
BE REALISTIC
Real Prospects graduates feel that careers advice should be less about fast-tracking students into the work place and more about preparing students for the realities of finding work after they graduate. They think it is important to manage students’ expectations while at the same time building their confidence.

• Managing expectations – Real Prospects graduates all agree that they didn’t expect finding a job to be quite so difficult. In the current climate, searching for jobs can be dispiriting and demoralising and graduates think it is important to make sure that students know how difficult it will be before they begin. Students need to know what to expect when they enter the graduate labour market, and graduates think it is important that they are made aware of the difficulties they will face in terms of both finding and securing jobs. They also think universities should remind students that although they are educated, they are also inexperienced, and as such should expect to begin their working life at the bottom of the career ladder. Real Prospects graduates who took entry-level positions and worked their way up tend to be extremely positive about their experiences in retrospect, but at the time they often felt like they had failed in the quest to secure a ‘good graduate job’ as soon as they left university. The experiences of Real Prospects graduates indicates that very few students go straight into full-time, permanent professional jobs without spending a certain amount of time temping or working part-time in a casual or voluntary role first. Providing students with case studies which describe how graduates secured their first professional role, as well as what they do in that role, is one way to ensure that students leave university with a realistic understanding of the difficulties they will face as they take on the responsibility of managing their own career.

• How to handle rejection – many graduates were unprepared for the number of applications they needed to submit before they secured a job and think it would be useful if careers services gave students some tips about handling rejection. Even simple suggestions such as ‘always remember to ask for feedback’ can be helpful.

• Building confidence – Real Prospects graduates agree that students should be made aware of the difficulties they will face when they are looking for work, but they also think it is important that students are reminded that employers value their skills and ambition because it can be difficult for students to remain positive when they are struggling to find a job. Moving into employment can be a stressful experience and many students lack confidence in their ability to succeed in the work place. Careers services need to prepare students for the reality of the labour market, but they also need to remind them that they are capable of successfully negotiating it.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

More practical information about the reality of searching for jobs e.g how to handle rejection, how much you will have to put into finding and applying for jobs’

‘Give more advice that is helpful in a practical way, rather than depressing talks about the lack of opportunities’

‘Prepare students for the length of time it will take for them to find employment’

‘Be more realistic about job opportunities post-graduation’

‘I think careers services need to ensure that students really know what it is that they will be able to do with their specific degree when they graduate. I’ve met many people with fantastic and completely unrealistic ideas about what they are going to do with their degrees.

‘Encourage students to be realistic, but optimistic’

‘Employers are looking for confident, articulate graduates and universities need to help students build their confidence and self esteem if they are to give them the best chance of securing the roles they really want’

‘Provide a more realistic idea of the type of work graduates will be involved in when they first start work’

‘Universities should be more realistic about opportunities for graduates in the workplace, given the upsurge in competition within the labour market. I found it more difficult than I had anticipated to secure employment after graduating, and felt under prepared for this’
LABOUR MARKET EXPERIENCE

How did Emma become a research associate?

EMMA (PHARMACOLOGY, 2005)

What are you doing now?
I'm a research associate at a university.

How did you become a research associate?
After completing my year in industry with a pharmaceuticals company, I decided that I was definitely going to apply for a PhD because I’d really enjoyed seeing how the theory I’d learned in my degree could be applied to the real world and decided a career in science was for me! I wanted to continue with my studies because I thought it would be difficult to progress as a scientist if I didn’t have a postgraduate qualification. While I was studying for my undergraduate degree I was fascinated by neuropharmacology and decided that I would like to study this further, but when I searched for PhDs in this field I couldn’t find anything suitable. However, while I was looking for PhD opportunities I came across an advert for a study which was taking place in the Neuroscience and Psychiatry department of my university. The study was directly related to the issues I wanted to explore in my PhD so I volunteered to participate in the project and through my involvement in the study I found out who to contact with regard to getting involved in this kind of research. I followed up my contacts and eventually managed to secure a PhD position within the department. I absolutely loved the area I ended up studying so was delighted when the university decided to keep me on as a post-doctoral research associate when I finished my PhD.

What does a research associate do?
I’m currently researching the neurobiology of craving and poor impulse control in heroin addiction so I’m involved in data collection and data analysis for this project. I’m currently recruiting patients to participate in the study and then carrying out neuropsychological tests with them before conducting brain imaging scans. I then follow the participants up to see how they do over the next six months, which enables me to identify which patients are most vulnerable to relapse after detoxification.

What do you like about your job?
I especially like the fact that my job is so varied. I can be at University analysing data one day at the drug detox units recruiting and meeting patients the next, and then at the brain imaging unit the next. I’m also involved in dissemination so I get to attend international conferences to talk about my research.

What are you planning to do next?
I want to continue to develop as a scientist and eventually lead my own lab.

What careers advice would you give to the students who will be graduating next year?
Be proactive. Think about what you want to do and exactly what you need to do in order to get there and then do it. If you don’t know what you should be doing, contact someone who is already in this role for advice, or a career advisor. Due to the ever increasing competitiveness of the job market, I’d advise graduates to do it sooner rather than later, or risk being left behind.

LABOUR MARKET EXPERIENCE

How did Ed become a fundraiser?

ED (POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 2009)

Did you gain any work experience while studying for your undergraduate degree?
While I was a student I had numerous part-time casual roles (I worked in a bar and have been a museum assistant and a sales assistant) and I spent 8 months teaching English in Spain. I also volunteered for Oxfam and was a regional manager and marketing officer for their Oxjam music festival.

What are you doing now?
I’m a fundraiser for a major international charity.

How did you become a fundraiser?
After University I had to move back home because I was running out of money. I started to look for work as soon as I graduated, while continuing to organise the Oxjam festival for Oxfam. I spent the next six months doing various temporary jobs until January 2010 when I was offered a long-term temporary role with a recruitment agency. I knew I didn’t want to work in recruitment forever so I joined the agency but continued to look for jobs and attend interviews at the same time. Four months later I was finally offered my current role on the strength of my previous fundraising experience and I joined the charity in May 2010. I’ve now been here for 9 months and love every minute!

What does a fundraiser do?
I’m responsible for generating income to support the work of the charity in the UK and overseas so I recruit people to participate in fundraising activities, manage events, prepare grant applications applying for funding from trusts and local companies, work with volunteer fundraising groups and support international appeals by facilitating donations at a local level.

What do you like about your job?
I love that my job is hugely varied, fast paced and relevant. I also care passionately about the work the charity is doing, which gives me an enormous sense of satisfaction every day.

What do you dislike about your job?
The job carries a great deal of responsibility, which can be stressful at times.

What are you planning to do next?
I would like to establish a successful fundraising department in this area for my current charity. Ultimately I would like to work for a range of different charities to gain experience of different working environments and the different fundraising challenges faced in each organisation.

What careers advice would you give to the students who will be graduating next year?
It’s very hard at the moment, but there are jobs out there. Stay strong, keep going, expect rejection and possibly lower your expectations! Most students expect to walk into a job as soon as they leave university, but I was job hunting for a year before I found anything. Be creative in your approach and remember that there are thousands of other graduates who have done a three year course and have worked in a bar while they were a student – you need to make yourself stand out (for the right reasons!). Above all, remember there ARE jobs out there, despite all the doom and gloom, and if you’re qualified you’ll find one in the end.
**LABOUR MARKET EXPERIENCE**

*How did Sam become an HR adviser?*

**SAM (ENGLISH LITERATURE, 2006)**

**What are you doing now?**

I'm an HR adviser.

**How did you become an HR adviser?**

After I graduated I took a temporary role while I continued to look for a more permanent position. I wasn’t really enjoying the work, so when I saw that a local hospital was advertising for an admin assistant I decided to apply. The position was only available for three months, but I thought it would be a good opportunity to try out a new area and if I didn’t enjoy the work it didn’t really matter because it was only a temporary contract. I actually ended up working for the hospital for fifteen months as I secured an extension to my contract and was then promoted to recruitment assistant, which was the next pay grade up. I decided I liked working in HR, but wanted to move to another hospital to gain some more experience so I applied for a position in a different hospital and spent just under two years working there, during which time I was promoted into an HR officer role, which gave me the opportunity to gain new skills and take on extra responsibility. While I was working for that hospital the Director left to take up a position in a different region and shortly after he moved he contacted me to ask if I would be interested in joining the team there, which I was. I have now been in my current role for just over a year and I am now an HR adviser and am studying for an MSc in HR management.

**What does an HR adviser do?**

As an HR adviser I support a division of around 2,000 members of staff (the hospital employs around 6,000 members of staff in total). I offer HR guidance and support to managers and provide information and advice about employment law.

**What do you like about your job?**

The role allows me to meet a variety of people and this combined with the varied workload means that I find the role stimulating and enjoyable. It is very rewarding and I have a lot of autonomy and am responsible for making decisions, which is very satisfying.

**What are you planning to do next?**

I am about to apply to become a senior HR adviser within the same hospital. I would like to progress to HR manager level before taking a break to have a family.

**What careers advice would you give to the students who will be graduating next year?**

Do something you enjoy and don’t be motivated by money. You need to be stimulated by your work because you have a long career ahead of you. Remember that you have plenty of time to develop your skills, so don’t feel under pressure to achieve all your career goals as soon as you graduate.
BE REALISTIC

• Employers are looking for more than just a degree, so work experience is essential. It will help you to differentiate yourself from other applicants and give you plenty of things to talk about when you attend interviews.

• Undertaking work experience is a great way to make contacts and build up a professional network in your field of interest. You can then use this network when you’re exploring jobs and searching for vacancies.

• If you are not sure what you want to do after university, work experience placements and internships can be a great way of trying out different industries and job roles before you decide on a career path.

• If you already know what you want to do after you leave university, it is important to make sure that you’ll actually enjoy the work. Try it out before you leave university to make sure it’s definitely the right job for you.

• Make the most of your time at university and try to do internships, work experience and voluntary work before you leave, especially if you know you won’t be able to rely on your parents to support you whilst you gain the experience once you have graduated.

• Do your research. Your university may have links with local employers or be able to organise placements or internships through the careers service. Make sure you are taking advantage of all the opportunities that are available to you.

• While you’re on a work experience placement or doing a part-time job take some time to reflect on the kinds of skills you’re gaining and write them down while they’re still fresh in your mind. This will make it easier to articulate how your experience demonstrates that you have these skills when you’re filling in application forms or responding to interview questions.

• If you are doing unpaid internships make sure that you are getting something out of it. If you aren’t learning new skills or gaining any useful experience don’t continue to work for free.

• Applying for work placements and internships is like applying for jobs – you have to be organised and apply early because lots of other students will be trying to secure those placements as well.

• Unpaid placements and internships can be useful if you’re trying to gain experience and they show employers that you are committed to working in a particular area, but try not to do too many of them because you might end up feeling like you’ll never get a paid position, and it is important to remain motivated and positive when you’re applying for jobs.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

“Take every opportunity you can to get work experience – it’s not as easy as you may think! There are thousands of students asking for work experience in the same places, so you cannot simply just send off a speculative letter and be accepted immediately. Think ahead and get as much experience as you can, as soon as you can.”

“Go to your careers centre often and especially go in your first term just to see what is on offer and start exploring possible future directions.”

“I would always advise people to talk about why they would like to do to anyone they meet, because you never know when someone might be able to help you gain work experience or find a role.”

“Don’t give up if you have to work for free, but also don’t let yourself be exploited. Agree your working hours and terms of employment beforehand and remember that you’re a volunteer, not a paid employee – you don’t have to stay if you’re not getting anything out of it.”

“Voluntary work offers you lots of opportunities to gain work experience, and it can increase your confidence as well as giving you something positive to put on your CV.”

“Think ahead and try to get as much work experience as you can before graduating. If I had spent more time volunteering in schools while I was at university I wouldn’t have had to wait so long before starting my teaching course.”

VOLUNTARY work

• Remember that volunteering is not just about acquiring skills, it is also fun to do. It gives you the opportunity to work with people you might not otherwise meet and is a really good way of contributing to a cause or supporting an organisation you feel strongly about.

• If you are taking a gap year to travel think about how you can gain experience of working in other cultures.

• If you are interested in working in a particularly competitive sector (such as journalism or the media) doing voluntary work for charity can be a great way to gain some experience. A charitable organisation is a business like any other and charities still need help publicising their activities, marketing their organisation, writing press releases, editing newsletters, organizing events etc.

FURTHER study

• Consider doing a postgraduate or professional qualification to set yourself apart from other graduate applicants – but remember that not all employers will understand the benefits of employing a graduate who has undertaken further study so remember you need to articulate how your further study adds value to your CV when you’re applying for jobs and talking about your qualifications in interviews.

RESEARCH

• You don’t want to panic and jump straight into the first job you see as soon as you graduate, so make sure that you leave yourself plenty of time to do some research and plan what you want to do and who you might want to work for. This will encourage you to be more selective about the jobs you apply for – you want to send in first-class applications for jobs you really want, not second-rate applications for jobs you don’t really care about.

• Do some research into the labour market to try to identify which industries are growing and which ones might be recruiting in the near future. Labour markets vary across the country, so try to find out what is happening in your local area.

• Read professional publications to familiarise yourself with the terminology that is used in your industry so you know what employers are referring to if they use them in interviews or job specifications. Reading industry publications can also be a good way of finding out how the industry works and who are the leading companies in the field.

• Before you apply for a role or attend an interview make sure you do some research into the company. Knowing what the company does, what it values and who its competitors are demonstrates that you are a diligent and enthusiastic applicant who is taking the recruitment and selection process seriously.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

“Visit as many careers fairs as you can, speak to the careers service and, more importantly, try and speak to people in the types of jobs you are applying for. There is only so much you can know about a role from reading online. You need to know if the day to day role is something you will enjoy.”

“Try to be flexible as the job market is really competitive. Don’t give up even if you have to wait for the job you really want, working in a role which isn’t your first choice isn’t a failure but building towards your career.”

“Try and get as much work experience as you can. And when you do get it, do it to the best of your ability. Don’t turn your nose up at being the offer the tea maker or photocopier, and when you get given the chance to contribute to a project, do your best and try to deliver more than they ask for (if that’s possible) as you will make your mark and could even be asked to stay on for some paid work.”

“Never too early to start thinking about what you might want to do when you leave university. Go to every careers fair, employer presentation and skills workshop going.”

“Get involved in student groups, lead on projects, participate in seminars, try to specialise in a particular field and always stay in touch with as many people as possible – they might be your ticket to paid employment.”

CAREERS ADVICE

What advice would Real Prospects graduates give to students who are about to enter the world of work?

CAREERS ADVICE

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

“Voluntary work offers you lots of opportunities to gain work experience, and it can increase your confidence as well as giving you something positive to put on your CV.”

“Think ahead and try to get as much work experience as you can before graduating. If I had spent more time volunteering in schools while I was at university I wouldn’t have had to wait so long before starting my teaching course.”

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THE APPLICATION PROCESS

- It may be time consuming, but you really do need to tailor your CV, covering letter and personal statement every time you apply for another role. Employers can tell if applicants are copying and pasting their examples. They expect you to tell them why you are a good candidate for the role, don’t expect them to try to work it out for themselves.
- When an application is unsuccessful always ask for feedback so you can improve the applications you send out in the future.
- Use your careers service. Ask them for advice when you’re writing your CV or practising your interview technique.
- Don’t be discouraged by rejection. Everyone gets rejected at some stage. Just make sure that you don’t let it derail your job search – you need to remain motivated and enthusiastic.
- Get your friends and family to proof your applications for you – they’ll pick up mistakes that you (as the author) are likely to miss. Employers have extremely sharp eyes when it comes to typos and spelling mistakes – they will assume you didn’t make the effort to proof read your application before you submitted it.
- If you want to join a graduate scheme start looking for opportunities and working out when you need to apply for roles sooner rather than later. Graduate schemes fill up really quickly and the deadlines for applications all come at once so make sure you leave yourself plenty of time to apply for everything you’re interested in.
- You can’t wait for jobs to come to you, you have to go out and find the opportunities.
- It is worth spending some time sending out speculative applications to employers you would like to work for. They may not have any vacancies at the time, but they’ll probably hold your letter on file and will remember you when a role becomes available. If they think you can offer the company something different they might even create a role for you.

NETWORKING

- Start building up your professional networks before you leave university – you would be surprised how easy it is to make contacts through work experience and volunteering – and don’t forget to maintain your relationships with your tutors and lecturers.
- Remember that you can use other people’s networks when you’re looking for work – ask your family and friends if they know anyone who might know of an opportunity, or sign up with a recruitment agency or recruitment website who will circulate your CV to a wider audience.
- Get someone to look at your CV and covering letters – make sure they’re perfect. Always prepare well for interviews and wear a suit. While you’re looking for work, volunteer and do work experience, for your CV and for your own benefit, don’t waste the time.
- ‘Be yourself!’ in interviews. Make eye contact and try to appear relaxed (even if you aren’t on the inside). Remember you’re allowed to smile (or even laugh if something is funny)!

IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

- All students should take the time to undertake CV writing, application form writing, interview skills and soft skills training. I would also tell them not to set sights too high, be prepared to start at the bottom, don’t be stupid and turn down jobs in pursuit of better paid jobs because the better paid jobs require a lot of work experience and good skills. Be prepared to move for a good job.
- ‘Be persistent! And always look to improve yourself grab the opportunities you can. Always research firms before you apply to them and tailor your applications. Be realistic and always spell check your applications!’
- ‘It’s not going to be easy. It is a very competitive market out there, but don’t give up. Don’t let all the knowledge and skills you have gained go to waste. Always keep your options open and keep searching for job opportunities. You may not be successful with job applications first time round, but keep trying you will get there eventually.’
- ‘Get someone to look at your CV and covering letters – make sure they’re perfect. Always prepare well for interviews and wear a suit. While you’re looking for work, volunteer and do work experience, for your CV and for your own benefit, don’t waste the time.’
- ‘Don’t be blinded by the bright lights of huge corporations offering graduate schemes. There are so many small businesses which are often overlooked and can provide much better opportunities for progression and responsibility.’

GETTING YOUR FIRST JOB

- When you graduate take any job you can get – it is easier to get another job when you’re already in employment.
- Try to make the most of any opportunities that come your way. As you gain more experience you will begin to build up your transferable skills and add to your CV.
- Don’t expect to get a highly paid job when you first graduate. Lower paid jobs will give you the opportunity to build up the experience and skills you need to apply for more senior roles later on.
- Don’t be complacent. When you take a job you don’t really want in order to pay the bills you should still be professional and make the effort to go above and beyond your job description in order to gain valuable experience and get yourself noticed.
- ‘Do something rather than nothing. You might not know what you want to do with the rest of your life, but it is important to do something in order to keep yourself (and your brain) active.’
- ‘Don’t expect to get your dream job straight away – you’ll need to work your way up.’
- ‘If you want to work for a particular company in a particular role, consider applying for a different role and once you’re in the company you might be able to use your contacts to move internally.’
- ‘There is never only one route to your career goal. Look at alternative routes and make sure you have a plan B; there is always another way to get to where you want to be.’
- Don’t underestimate the importance of temporary work – it can help you gain valuable experience and it can sometimes even lead to a permanent position.
- ‘It is more important to be happy and have a healthy work-life balance than to stay in a job you hate because you think it is secure and it pays well – if a job you thought you’d enjoy makes you unhappy don’t be afraid to change direction and search for a new role.’
- ‘If you want to make the most of the opportunities that are available you really need to be mobile – consider whether you could relocate to a different region of the UK or even abroad.
- ‘Ignore the media hype about the job market – there are jobs available, you just need to spend some time making a concerted effort to find and apply to them.’

IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

- ‘Don’t have unrealistic salary expectations and ignore the newspapers that do!’
- ‘Be realistic and don’t expect to go into your ideal job straight away’
- ‘Graduates have to be realistic and move to where the work is – I moved from Wales to Hampshire for my first role’
- ‘Don’t give up on your dream but at the same time be realistic and be willing to make a few sacrifices. Consider getting some form of permanent work to start with, and once the recession has improved you can then go after what you want’
- ‘Tell your CV with work experience (paid & unpaid, whether or not it is directly relevant to your desired career), extra-curricular activities (and any positions you held), charity/voluntary work, positions of responsibility and more! If you have any weak spots – do things to change them, don’t try to hide them’
- ‘It’s never too soon to start thinking about jobs, but don’t let job hunting jeopardise your dissertation or revision. You will always have the opportunity to apply for more jobs, you won’t have the opportunity to re-do your degree’
- ‘Don’t expect to get your dream job straight away, you’ll need to work your way up’
- ‘If you want to work for a particular company in a particular role, consider applying for a different role and once you’re in the company you might be able to use your contacts to move internally.’
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CAREERS ADVICE

• Be realistic about the opportunities that are out there. It’s a very competitive job market and you are competing with lots of other graduates so you can’t expect to go into a company at the top. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing as starting at the bottom and working your way up the ladder can actually give you a better insight into how the business operates and also gives you an opportunity to gain the respect of your colleagues and managers.

• Don’t forget that there are alternatives to permanent employment – you can freelance or work several part-time jobs to build up a portfolio of skills.

• Self-employment can be a fantastic experience – even if you move back into employment after a couple of years it can still be a great way to gain valuable experience for your CV.

• Consider doing some short-courses to improve your office skills – they will equip you with the basic administrative skills you’ll need to secure temporary work while you’re looking for jobs and will also stand you in good stead when you secure a permanent position.

• Don’t sell yourself short. Have confidence in your ability and apply for jobs that you don’t think you can do as you may be surprised at how capable you actually are.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS…

‘Don’t expect a high-paying graduate job. But do work extra hard, do as many extra-curricular activities as you can, get as much work experience as possible, and start thinking about why you’re better than everyone else!’

‘Make a list of competency-based questions and your answers to them – this makes the application process much faster, rather than having to think up an example each time. Make a list of questions asked at interviews, your answers to them and the reaction to your answers and review this regularly – some employers will ask similar generic questions and it’s easier to think of suitable responses when not under pressure.’
JEN (FRENCH & ENGLISH LITERATURE, 1999)

What are you doing now?
I’m a project manager.

How did you become a project manager?
After I graduated I started a PGCE. About halfway through I decided teaching wasn’t for me but completed the course anyway. Once I’d finished my PGCE I temped for a while before getting a junior position in the civil service. I applied for the central government graduate scheme (genuinely believing they didn’t employ northerners) and they called my bluff by giving me the job. I did that for two years before leaving the UK to go travelling abroad. When I returned to the UK I moved back home and temped for a while before moving to a bigger city where the job market was more buoyant. I got a temporary job as a PA in the NHS and was then asked to take on a project management role they had been unable to fill. Two years later I was recommended for another project management role and I’ve been in my current role for about three and a half years. I didn’t really have a career plan so I’ve ended up in my current role by accident rather than design. I don’t think I really understood my own strengths until quite recently which explains my rather curious career path!

What does a project manager do in the NHS do?
My remit is to redesign and implement modernised and more cost-effective health services. My job is to modernise services and agree common standards and protocols across the region so we can make savings without compromising the quality of the service.

What do you like about your job?
I enjoy the variety and like the fact that I am free to manage my own work (within reason!).

What do you dislike about your job?
I sometimes get frustrated by the politics of the NHS and the egos of some of the medical staff.

What careers advice would you give to the students who will be graduating next year?
Tips for getting a job:
- Don’t be in a rush to get started on a ‘career’. Some of the most interesting people I know still don’t know what they want to be when they grow up, or have had more than one ‘career’. Delaying your entry into a career is no bad thing. Some of the most valuable life and communication skills I learnt have been in the ‘worst’ jobs I’ve had (e.g. hospital cleaner, betting shop cashier). Take time to invest in personal development as it will give you some really valuable insights about yourself and will contribute to helping you work out what your future career might be. And don’t forget to have hobbies. Not only will they help you develop ‘soft’ skills, they’ll also help you be more rounded and help combat stress in the work place.

What careers advice would you give to the students who will be graduating next year?
- Get work experience! The job market is extremely competitive so don’t be disheartened if your job isn’t exactly what you hoped for – concentrate on what you will be able to take away from the experience when you move on to bigger and better things.

LABOUR MARKET EXPERIENCE
How did Jen become a project manager?

LAURA (BUSINESS AND EVENT MANAGEMENT, 2008)

Did you gain any work experience while studying for your undergraduate degree?
I did a 13-month internship at a global technology company where I worked as a marketing analyst, editing and updating websites, putting together newsletters and working on the company’s loyalty program.

What are you doing now?
I’m a marketing professional.

How did you become a marketing professional?
I had just started my second year at university when the business school invited me to a lecture which was being given by a couple of guest speakers who worked for a global technology company. They talked about what it was like to work for the company and told us about the internships we could apply for if we were taking a sandwich degree (which I was). Listening to the company’s intern talk about how much she enjoyed working for them inspired me to apply for a role myself. She described the company as having strong values and a commitment to taking risks and helping customers and generally as being a great place to work and I loved the idea of work for such as prestigious brand. I applied for the marketing role, attended a really enjoyable (yes, enjoyable!) assessment day and was offered a position for the following year. The placement was really enjoyable and probably the most valuable year of my degree! I then returned to university for my final year and after spending some time developing a business plan for a small business for one of my modules I decided I would like to work for a small business when I graduated so I could get a better idea of how businesses operate as a whole. When I graduated I joined a small software company as a business developer, but soon began to miss the dynamic working environment you get in larger organisations. I also missed the opportunities you get to work on a wide variety of projects with a range of different people. Three months into the job my previous employer (the global technology company) offered me a temporary position covering maternity leave and I jumped at the chance to work with them again. Once I was there I was determined to work really hard to show how committed I was and in the end my dedication paid off and they offered me a permanent graduate entry-level role earlier this year. I love it!

What does a marketing professional do?
I’m responsible for gathering customer information and monitoring data quality so we can adapt our systems and operations to improve customer experience.

What do you like about your job?
I love that I can get involved in a whole range of different projects – there is never a dull day!

What do you dislike about your job?
It can be frustrating when you’re trying to secure resources to make improvements to the systems.

What are you planning to do next?
I’m not sure what I would like to do next – perhaps move up into a middle-management role at some point.

What careers advice would you give to the students who will be graduating next year?
Get work experience! The job market is extremely competitive so don’t be disheartened if your job isn’t exactly what you hoped for – concentrate on what you will be able to take away from the experience when you move on to bigger and better things.
**KEY MESSAGES**

‘THERE IS ONLY SO MUCH AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION CAN DO FOR ITS STUDENTS. GRADUATES NEED TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR OWN FUTURES’

Universities and careers services are under increasing pressure to deliver more for less, and graduates understand that they do not have unlimited funds to subsidise all the activities they would like to see offered. However, finding out a bit more about what graduates think universities should be doing can be a really useful way of identifying new ways of supporting students as they make the transition from education to employment.

‘CAREERS SERVICES NEED TO BE MUCH MORE PROACTIVE WHEN IT COMES TO APPROACHING STUDENTS’

Real Prospects graduates think careers services need to market themselves much more aggressively if they are going to attract the attention of students who are already swamped with information about courses, deadlines and other extracurricular activities. Most careers services offer a whole range of support services, but many students are missing out because they don’t realise that these opportunities exist.

‘I SOMETIMES HAD THE FEELING THE CAREERS SERVICE ONLY WANTED TO HELP ME IF I WANTED TO JOIN AN ORGANISATION LIKE PWC OR DELOITTE’

Many Real Prospects graduates feel that universities prioritise the needs of students who want to apply to big graduate recruiters, and neglect those who might be interested in finding out more about small or medium-sized companies (SMEs) or academia. They think careers services should do more to ensure students also hear about the opportunities which are available in SMEs and niche industries, and they also think it is important that these roles are not seen as ‘second best’ when compared to the ‘gold standard’ of graduate training schemes.

‘PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE LENGTH OF TIME IT WILL TAKE THEM TO FIND EMPLOYMENT’

Real Prospects graduates feel careers advice should be less about fast-tracking students into the workplace, and more about preparing students for the realities of finding work after they graduate. They think it is important that students are made aware of the difficulties they might encounter in the graduate labour market, and believe meeting alumni gives students a great opportunity to find out what other graduates have gone on to do and, perhaps more importantly, how long it has taken them to get there.

‘IF UNIVERSITIES HAD ASKED US WHAT WE WANTED WE WOULD HAVE BEEN MUCH MORE LIKELY TO ATTEND CAREERS EVENTS’

Real Prospects graduates believe students would be more likely to access careers services if the university asked students what they want to know. This is particularly important for mature students, who tend to believe that careers services are designed for 18-21 year olds who have never had a permanent job and are therefore unable to offer other students the support and advice they need.

‘I WAS VERY NAIVE AND DIDN’T THINK I NEEDED TO PREPARE MUCH FOR A CAREER WHEN I WAS AT UNIVERSITY, BUT I WOULD HAVE REALLY BENEFITED FROM DOING AN INTERNSHIP OR SOME WORK EXPERIENCE WHEN I HAD THE TIME AND FUNDS TO DO SO’

Graduates think universities should do more to make sure that students are aware that they need to undertake some form of work experience if they are going to be able to compete with other applicants when they enter the labour market. They feel students need to be told why work experience is important, as well as how and when they should start thinking about doing it.

They think it is important that universities use their influence to endorse the concept of work experience more generally, because it can be difficult for individual students to convince employers of the benefits of taking on a student intern. Graduates think universities could do more to persuade employers that there is a business case for taking on a work experience student, as this might make it easier for students to secure placements when they are seeking work experience opportunities themselves.